

# HINDUISM

Contemporary Hindus commonly refer to their tradition as the "universal truth" (*sanatana-dharma*), implying that it is a meta-tradition which is able to embrace the truths of all other systems of thought while transcending them through its expansive ability to embrace truth in multiple manifestations. Hinduism is the dominant religious tradition of the Indian subcontinent, and currently over 700 million people consider themselves to be Hindus.

## ***DIVERSITY WITHIN HINDUISM***

**Hinduism is, however, a difficult tradition to define. Its dominant feature is diversity, and its adherents are not required to accept any doctrine or set of doctrines, to perform any particular practices, or to accept any text or system as uniquely authoritative. Many Hindus, for example, are monotheists and believe that there is only one God, despite the proliferation of gods in Hinduism. They assert that God has many manifestations, and that God may appear differently to different people and different cultures.**

**Other Hindus are polytheists who believe that the various gods they worship are distinct entities, while pantheistic Hindus perceive the divine in the world around them, as a principle that manifests in natural phenomena, particular places, flora and fauna, or other humans. Some Hindus consider themselves to be agnostic, contending that God is in principle unknown and unknowable. Other Hindus are atheists who do not believe in the existence of any gods, but this position does not lead to their excommunication by their fellow Hindus. Even more confusingly, in daily practice it is common to see one person or community sequentially manifesting combinations of these attitudes in different circumstances.**

Hinduism has a plethora of doctrines and systems, but there is no collection of tenets that could constitute a universally binding Hindu creed, nor is there any core belief that is so fundamental that it would be accepted by all Hindus. Hinduism has produced a vast collection of sacred texts, but no one has the authority of the Christian Bible, the Jewish Torah, or the Muslim Qur'an. Perhaps the most widely revered sacred texts are the Vedas ("Wisdom Texts"), most of which were written over 2,000 years ago, but despite their generally-accepted authoritativeness few Hindus today are even able to read them, and the *brahmins* (priests) whose sacred task is to memorize and recite them generally are unable to explain what they mean.

In searching for a way to define the boundaries of Hinduism, the term "Hindu" may provide some help. It was originally coined by Persians who used it to refer to the people they encountered in northern India. Thus the term "Hindu" originally referred to the inhabitants of a geographical area, and in later centuries it was adopted by people of India who identified themselves with the dominant religious tradition of the subcontinent.

Contemporary Hinduism is still delimited more by geography than by belief or practice: A

**Hindu is someone who lives on the Indian subcontinent or is descended from people of the region, who considers himself or herself to be a Hindu, and who is accepted as such by other Hindus. There are no distinctive doctrines whose acceptance would serve as a litmus test of orthodoxy, no ecclesiastical authority that is able to declare some to be Hindus in good standing or label others as heretics, and no ceremony whose performance would serve as a definitive rite of passage into the tradition. There is no founder of the tradition; it has no dominant system of theology or a single moral code. Contemporary Hinduism embraces groups whose respective faiths and practices have virtually nothing in common with each other.**

**This is not to say, however, that Hinduism lacks distinctive doctrines, practices, or scriptures; in fact, the exact opposite is the case. Hinduism has developed a plethora of philosophical schools, rituals, and sacred texts, and its adherents commonly assert a belief in a shared heritage, historical continuity, and family relationships between the multiple manifestations of their tradition. The selections given below represent only a small sampling of the vast corpus of Hindu religious literature. In addition, it should be noted that this literature represents only a tiny part of the Hindu tradition, and primarily**

**reflects the views and practices of a small intellectual elite. The vast majority of Hindus have been—and continue to be—primarily illiterate agricultural workers with little if any knowledge of the sacred scriptures. Their practices are generally derived from local cults and beliefs that often have little in common with the religion and philosophy of the authors of the scriptures. Furthermore, these texts do not form a coherent system, but are as diverse as Hinduism itself. They were written over the course of millennia and reflect shifting paradigms and political, religious, and social agendas, geographical differences, and varying ideas about how people should worship, think, live, and interact.**

## *Hindu Scriptures.*

Hinduism may be compared to a complex symphony in which new themes are introduced as the piece develops, while old ones continue to be woven into its texture. Nothing is ever truly lost, and elements of the distant past often return to prominence at unexpected times, although often in forms that are altered in accordance with the intellectual and religious currents of a particular time and place. The scriptures of Hinduism reflect its diversity and its complex history. They include ancient hymns to anthropomorphic gods and liturgical texts detailing how priests should prepare sacrifices, mystical texts that speculate on the nature of ultimate reality, devotional literature to a variety of deities, philosophical texts of great subtlety and insight, and combinations of these and related themes.

The earliest stratum of Indian sacred literature that is accessible today is found in the Vedas, which evolved into their present form between 1400 and 400 B.C.E. The earliest of these were brought to India around 1300 B.C.E. by semi-nomadic tribes who referred to themselves as Aryans, meaning "noble" or "wise." Upon their arrival, the newcomers encountered indigenous inhabitants, who were dubbed "slaves" (*dasa* or *dasyu*). The Vedas are referred to by

Hindus as "revelation" (*shruti*, literally "what is heard"), in contrast to other scriptures referred to as "tradition" (*smriti*, literally "what is remembered"). Both classes are regarded as canonical, but the latter is not considered to have the same level of authoritativeness as the Vedas. The Vedas, being completely transcendent, are not subject to human imperfections, but are products of direct revelation.

There are four Vedas: (1) the *Rig Veda*, so named because it is composed of stanzas (*rik*); (2) the *Sama Veda* (composed mostly of hymns taken from the *Rig Veda* and set to various melodies, or *saman*); (3) the *Yajur Veda* (composed of *yajus*, selected ritual prayers, mostly taken from the *Rig Veda*); and (4) the *Atharva Veda* (a collection of ritual texts named after the sage Atharvan). The Vedas contain several primary types of literature: (1) chants or hymns (*samhita*), generally directed toward the gods (*deva*) of the Vedic pantheon; (2) ritual texts (*brahmana*), which detail the sacrifices performed by brahmins; (3) mystical texts concerned with the quest for ultimate truth (*aranyakas* and *upanishads*). According to tradition, the Vedas are not the product of human composition (*apaurusheya*), but are a part of the very fabric of reality. They were

directly perceived by "seers" (*rishi*), whose mystical contemplations—aided by ingestion of an intoxicating beverage called *soma*—enabled them to intuit primordial sounds reverberating throughout the universe, and rendered into human language as the books of the Vedas.



## ***ARYAN RELIGION AND SOCIETY***

Contemporary scholars commonly refer to the indigenous people of the subcontinent as Dravidians, and recent archeological evidence suggests that they attained a high degree of social development prior to the arrival of the Aryans, although their society was probably in decline by the time the Aryans began to enter India. The Aryans were of European stock, and described themselves as tall, fair-skinned, blond-haired, and civilized, while they characterized the indigenous people as short, snub-nosed, curly-haired, barbaric, and immoral. They viewed their coming as a positive development that introduced righteousness and civilization to the region, and during the next several centuries they gradually subjugated the Dravidians, who were generally relegated to the lowest levels of Aryan society.

From an early period, the Aryans and their descendants propounded the idea that human society should ideally be stratified, with each social class having clearly defined functions and duties. At the top of the hierarchy were the brahmins, the priestly class, whose sacred duty was to perform sacrifices to the gods described in the Vedas. Many of these gods were personifications of natural phenomena, such as the sun and moon, wind, and so forth. Many

gods were believed to have dominion over a particular natural force or phenomenon, and the rituals of the Vedas were commonly directed to either one god or a small group of gods who were considered to have the ability to affect a particular sphere of divine provenance.

The role of the priests was central in this system: they were expected to remain ritually pure and to preserve the sacred texts, along with the sacred lore of priestcraft. Their social function prevented them from engaging in manual labor, trade, agriculture, or other non-priestly occupations, since these were considered polluting. In exceptional circumstances occasioned by special need they were allowed to earn a living by other means, but ideally their lives should be devoted to study of the sacred Vedas and performance of Vedic rituals. This was crucial to the maintenance of the system of "upholding the world" (*loka-samgraha*) which was a core concern of Vedic religion. In this system, the brahmins performed a pivotal function in offering sacrifices to the gods. The sacrifices were generally transmuted into smoke through the agency of Agni, god of fire (who is manifested in the ritual fire, as well as other forms of combustion). Smoke converted the material of the sacrifice into a subtle essence suitable for the gods' consumption, and the

process required that the brahmins remain ritually pure, since any pollution they acquired was passed on to their sacrifices. The gods would naturally be insulted if offered unclean food and would respond by denying the requests the brahmins made on behalf of the sponsors of the sacrifices.

The Vedic system was based on a symbiosis of gods and humans: the gods required the sacrificial offerings, and humans needed the gods to use their supernatural powers to maintain cosmic order (*rita*). The system assumed that humans only prosper in a stable and ordered cosmos, an idea that is reflected in the story of the slaying of the demon Vritra ("Obstructor") by Indra, the king of the gods in the Vedas. Demons thrive in chaos, and at the beginning of time Vritra rules over a chaotic cosmos until Indra, after a mighty battle, slays him and thus makes it possible for the gods to establish order. This primordial battle reflects the crucial role played by the gods in establishing and maintaining cosmic law.

The concerns of Vedic literature are primarily practical and this-worldly. They focus on particular pragmatic goals, such as bountiful crops, fertility, peace, stability, wealth, and so forth. The results of the sacrifices are believed to accrue in the present life, and although a world

**of the dead is mentioned, it is does not play a major role in the early Vedic tradition.**

## *Hymns of the Early Vedic Period*

The greatest record of Hindu mythology from this period is the Rig Veda, which contains hymns and ritual texts devoted to the worship of the Vedic gods. These verses describe the attributes of the gods, recount the mythos of each god and his or her particular sacrificial functions and associations. The first hymn depicts the creation of the universe as beginning with the sacrifice of Purusha ("Man"), a giant god whose body formed the raw material for the formation of the stars, the planets, and for living things. According to the story, the four social classes (varna) of Hinduism were also created through this sacrifice, thus providing a scriptural justification for the stratification of Indian society. Another view of creation indicates that originally existence arose from non-existence and that the gods later were produced by a goddess "who crouched with legs spread," an image with obvious anthropomorphic overtones. It suggests that the creation of the gods was similar to a human birth, but the position described may also suggest that creation is linked with the practice of yoga, which is believed to produce energy that may be used in the generation of life.

In Vedic mythology, Indra is said to be the king of the gods, and he embodies the warrior virtues

valued by the conquering Aryans. He is fearless in battle, always victorious over his enemies and, although he is sometimes portrayed as proud and boastful, these qualities do not detract from his prowess as a warrior. This hymn recounts the greatest of his mighty deeds, the slaying of the demon Vritra, a powerful serpent-like creature that was wreaking havoc throughout the universe, holding back the rain waters that are essential to the prosperity of living things, and obstructing the establishment of cosmic order, which is required for a stable and harmonious world. Wielding his mighty thunderbolt, Indra slays the demon, splits open his body, cuts off his limbs, and thus eliminates the threat he poses.

Agni is one of the most important gods of the Vedas. As the god of fire, he transmutes sacrificial offerings into smoke, which is consumed by the gods. Thus he serves as the intermediary between the divine and human realms and is a paradigm for the brahmin priests. Vedic hymns invoke Agni in his role as transporter of the dead. He is asked to burn the corpse of a dead man and to ensure that he is brought to the land of the dead. The concept of afterlife is rather vague in the early Vedas. There are references to a world of the dead, ruled by Yama, who was the first human to die.

**He found the way to the land of the dead, and now he brings others there. At the end of the ritual the pyre is soaked so thoroughly with water that a small pool is formed, and plants, frogs, and other living things will grow there, symbolizing the renewal of life from the ashes of death.**

**Soma is an intoxicating drink that plays a major role in Vedic literature. It was made from a creeping plant that was crushed and strained to make a whitish beverage that apparently produced visions and ecstatic states of mind. The plant used is a matter of current debate, and a number of theories have been proposed, none of which is considered definitive by contemporary scholars. As this passage indicates, those who drank it experienced a feeling of exaltation and expansion of consciousness. The writer of this hymn claims that drinking it has also made him immortal.**

**Gender issues also play an important role in Vedic writings. One hymn depicts a struggle between a husband and wife named Agastya and Lopamudra. Lopamudra has just successfully seduced Agastya, who was trying to avoid sexual intercourse in order to store up the vital energy he acquired as a product of yogic exertions. It captures a common theme in classical Indian literature: woman as temptress, whose**

**unrestrained sexual desire and physical charms distract male yogins from their ascetic practice and cause them to dissipate the power they have painstakingly gained through meditation and self-restraint. Another hymn is spoken by a woman who has managed to eliminate her rivals and emerge victorious over her husband, who now submits to her will:**

**1. There the sun has risen, and here my good fortune has risen. Being a clever woman, and able to triumph, I have triumphed over my husband.**

**2. I am the banner; I am the head. I am the formidable one who has the deciding word. My husband will obey my will alone, as I emerge triumphant.**

**3. My sons kill their enemies and my daughter is an empress, and I am completely victorious. My voice is supreme in my husband's ears.**

**4. The oblation that Indra made and so became glorious and supreme, this is what I have made for you, O gods. I have become truly without rival wives.**

**5. Without rival wives, killer of rival wives, victorious and pre-eminent, I have grabbed**



**for myself the attraction of the other women  
as if it were the wealth of flighty women.**

**6. I have conquered and become pre-  
eminent over these rival wives, so that I may  
rule as empress over this hero and over the  
people.**

**[Rig Veda 10.159]**

**Other Vedic hymns focus on sacrificial rites  
which help the sacrificer mentally prepare prior  
to performance of the sacrifice. He visualizes the  
fire altar as the entire universe and views the  
sacrifice as a way to attain spiritual knowledge.  
It is notable in that it shows the increasingly  
cosmic significance given to the rituals: they  
were no longer merely localized sacrifices  
performed for particular ends, but instead  
microcosmic expressions of macrocosmic forces  
and processes. The sacrificer meditates on the  
greater ramifications of the sacrifice about to be  
performed, its cosmic repercussions, and its  
transformative effects on the person who  
performs it. It also shows an expanding view of  
the cosmos and a corresponding expansion in  
the religious vision of brahmin priests, who are  
no longer content simply to perform sacrifices  
for limited goals, but who are increasingly**

interested in the effects they will have beyond this world and in the mind of the sacrificer. One important kind of sacrificial rite was the horse sacrifice which served to establish the dominion of a king by demonstrating how large an area he controlled. For a year prior to the sacrifice, a horse would be set free to wander wherever it wished, indicating the hegemony of the king. To the extent that other rulers were unable to turn the horse away, it served notice of the areas a particular ruler effectively controlled. At the end of the year the horse was offered as a sacrifice to the gods, but although it was killed it is stated in the ritual that it would enjoy a future in heaven.

## ***THE UPANISHADS AND YOGA***

The focus shifts in the later Vedic period, in which texts of speculative philosophy and mysticism begin to appear. Referred to as Aranyakas and Upanishads, they were written by sages who often expressed dissatisfaction with the ritualism and this-worldly focus of the early Vedic texts. Their authors sought the ultimate power behind the sacrifices, the force that gives rise to gods, humans, and all the other phenomena of the universe. They found this through a process of inward-looking meditation that sought an unchanging essence beyond the transient phenomena of existence. The present life was no longer viewed as the beginning and end of one's existence; rather, living beings were said to be reborn in successive lives in accordance with their actions (*karma*). The actions of the present result in opposite and equal reactions in the future, and one's present life was said to be a result of the karma accrued in the past. The cycle of existence (*samsara*) was said by the sages of the Upanishads to be beginningless, but it may be ended. It is perpetuated by a basic misunderstanding of the true nature of reality (*avidya*, "ignorance"), but one may escape it by attaining correct understanding of truth, which is only found by

people who shift their attention from external things to find the truly real.

By following the path of wisdom that correctly discriminates the real from the unreal, the truly important from the merely pleasant, and the changeless from the transitory, the sage eventually discovers that within everyone is an eternal, unchanging essence, an immortal soul referred to as the "self" (*atman*). The Upanishads declare that this essence alone survives death, that it has been reborn countless times in an infinite variety of different bodies, while itself remaining unchanged by the multiple identities we all develop in successive lifetimes. It is characterized by three qualities: being, consciousness, and bliss (*sat cit ananda*), meaning that it is pure, unchanging being, and its nature is never altered, despite the changing external circumstances of our lives; it is pure consciousness that takes no notice of the vicissitudes of our lives; and it remains unaffected by our joys, sorrows, hopes, disappointments, pleasures, or pains, and so it is in a continuous state of equanimity. Moreover, the Upanishadic sages identified the self with the cosmic ultimate, something supremely mysterious, hidden from ordinary perception but all-pervasive, supremely subtle, the essence of all that is. This ultimate was said to be beyond

**words or conceptual thought, and was referred to as "Brahman," because it is the purest and most sublime principle of existence, just as in human society brahmins are the purest and holiest class**

### *Specific Upanishads.*

**The Katha Upanishad presents the story of a brahmin boy named Naciketas. His father, Aruni, is performing a sacrifice in which he is required to give away all his possessions, but Naciketas notices that he is not complying with the spirit of the sacrifice. Naciketas asks his father, "To whom will you give me," to which his father angrily replies, "I give you to Yama [the god of death]." Unfortunately for both Naciketas and his father, words spoken in the context of a sacrifice have great power, and so Naciketas is immediately sent to the palace of Yama.**

**Yama, however, is not in the palace when Naciketas arrives and does not return for three days. When Yama returns and sees that Naciketas has been waiting for a long while and has not been given the courtesy due to a brahmin, he apologizes and offers to make restitution by granting Naciketas three wishes. Being a dutiful son, Naciketas first asks that he be able to return to his father and that his father receive him with happiness and love instead of anger.**

**His next wish is significant: he asks Yama to teach him about the Naciketas fire for which he is named. This is significant because it shows**

that in this text the traditional values and practices of brahmins are not being questioned. Naciketas does not doubt the efficacy of the sacrifices; instead, he wishes to learn more about them, and only after this does he make his third request, in which he asks Yama to tell him what happens to a human being after death.

Yama responds by testing Naciketas in order to determine his sincerity in asking about this. He offers Naciketas worldly goods instead, things like wealth, land, power, long-lived sons and grandsons, fame, etc., but none of these things interest Naciketas. He understands that such things are transitory and fleeting, and he wishes instead for knowledge of the atman (the self), which is truly valuable. Having tested his resolve, Yama praises him for choosing the good (shreyas) over the pleasant (preyas). Yama then teaches Naciketas about the atman, the essence of each individual, the eternal, unchanging reality that exists forever, unaffected by the circumstances and events of a person's countless rebirths. The atman, he declares, cannot be known through the senses or the intellect: it must be known through direct, intuitive realization. The culmination of the teaching is Yama's revelation that the atman is not only a personal essence; it is also said to be identical with the cosmic Ultimate, called Brahman.

**The Mundaka Upanishad expresses a somewhat different opinion of the value of sacrifices: it calls them "unsteady boats" that should not be relied on by a person wishing to leave cyclic existence. It does not, however, urge brahmins to stop performing sacrifices, but instead warns them not to rely on them exclusively and instead advises them to remove themselves from the world, practice asceticism and devotion in the forest in order to work at achieving a tranquil mind that knows truth.**

**The Aruni Upanishad instructs the aspiring world renouncer (samnyasin) on the proper motivation for leaving society. It indicates that one should give up performance of the Vedic rituals and leave family, friends, and occupation behind, focusing one's attention on the final goal of realization of the atman. In a special ritual, one takes into oneself the sacred fire that one had maintained as a householder, which now becomes identified with the fire of the digestive processes. One discards the sacred thread that one has worn since the initiation (upanayana) ceremony, which designates one as a member of one of the three "twice-born" classes. After this one has no caste identity, and can wander anywhere—and take food from anyone—without fear of ritual pollution.**



***Vedanta.*** Shankara was one of the greatest expositors of the thought of the Upanishads and the primary exponent of the non-dualist (advaita) school of commentary. The Upanishadic statement "That is you" (tat tvam asi). is viewed by Shankara and other exponents of non-dualist Vedanta as a statement of the non-difference of atman and Brahman. He also contends that the path to liberation is a solitary one and states that every person must win salvation alone, and that no one else can help. Even the scriptures are only guideposts, but one who becomes attached to them will remain enmeshed in cyclic existence. They point the way, but the goal is only reached by those who transcend all mundane supports and actualize direct, non-conceptual understanding of the atman. Maya plays a central role in Shankara's interpretation of the Upanishads. The term literally means "magic" or "illusion," and he claims that it is the power by which Brahman hides the truth from ordinary beings. It is a creative power that causes the apparent phenomena of cyclic existence to be superimposed on the unitary Brahman.

Maya, in her potential aspect, is the divine power of the Lord. She has no beginning. She is composed of the three qualities

**(guna), subtle, beyond perception. It is from the effects she produces that her existence is inferred by the wise. It is she who gives birth to the whole universe. She is neither being nor non-being, nor a mixture of both. She is neither divided nor undivided, nor a mixture of both. She is neither an indivisible whole, nor composed of parts, nor a mixture of both. She is most strange. Her nature is inexplicable. Just as knowing a rope to be a rope destroys the illusion that it is a snake, so Maya is destroyed by direct experience of Brahman—the pure, the free, the one without a second. [Viveka-chudamani, p. 49]**

**Ramanuja disagrees with the non-dualist system of Upanishadic interpretation. Instead, he contends that it is absurd to completely equate the absolute Brahman with the individual atman. As an exponent of devotionism, Ramanuja rejects the non-dualist system, since it would make devotion absurd. If atman and Brahman were one, there would be no real basis for worship. Ramanuja contends that the Upanishadic statement "That is you" does not mean what non-dualists think it does; rather, it indicates that there are two separate entities, atman and Brahman, and that the former is wholly dependent upon the latter, like a wave in**

**relation to the ocean. The wave appears to stand apart from the ocean, but its substance and being derive from the ocean, although it has at least a qualifiedly separate identity. Similarly, the atman derives from Brahman, but because the history of each atman is distinctly its own, it contradicts reason and actual experience to claim that atman is completely identical with Brahman.**

## *Yoga*

According to this system, the perceptions of ordinary beings are profoundly distorted by ignorance, and the only way to attain correct knowledge is through a process of discipline (*yoga*) in which one's thoughts and body are gradually brought under control, and one's attention is turned away from sense objects and directed within. These premises are shared with the system outlined in the *Yoga Aphorisms* (*Yoga-sutra*) of Patanjali, who is credited with gathering together the principle practices and premises of the yoga system. Patanjali's system, however, differs in significant ways from that of the Upanishads, although both use the term "yoga" to describe their respective training programs. The Upanishads outline a monistic system in which the sole reality is said to be Brahman, while everything else is based on mistaken perceptions. Patanjali, by contrast, contends that both matter (*prakriti*) and spirit (*purusha*) are real entities, and the goal of his system is separation (*kaivalya*) of spirit from matter, while the Upanishads aim at a final apotheosis in which all dualities are transcended and one realizes the fundamental identity of the self and Brahman. The final goal of the Upanishads is expressed in the greatest of the "great statements"

*(mahavakya)* that sum up the central insights of the Upanishadic sages: "That is you" (*tat tvam asi*), which expresses an absolute identity of the individual soul and Brahman. Patanjali's goal, by contrast, is separation that liberates one's spiritual essence from matter.

The goal of both systems is liberation (*moksha*) from the cycle of existence, but each conceives release differently. Both consider yoga to be the primary practice for attaining the final goal, and for both yoga is a program of introspective meditation that begins with physical discipline, control of random, ignorant thoughts, and development of insight into unchanging truth, but the ontological presuppositions and ultimate goals of the two systems differ in significant details.

For Patanjali, the term "yoga" may be used to refer to a range of practices for disciplining mind and body. In Patanjali's system the focus is on developing progressively greater control over the agitations and fluctuations of mind and body in order to arrive at a state of perfect equanimity. One accomplishes this by turning the attention inward, away from sense objects, which leads to detachment and wisdom. A person who becomes detached from external things has no basis for continued existence, and thus becomes liberated from the cycle of birth

**and death. Patanjali describes the process by which one develops one's powers of concentration through disciplining thoughts, bringing mind and body under control, and weaning oneself from attachment to external objects. He also discusses the results of yogic practice, which include unshakable mental stability, equanimity, dispassion, and eventually liberation from the cycle of birth and death.**

## ***PURANAS AND EPICS.***

**In contemporary India the Puranas and Epics are among the most widely known of Hindu scriptures. The Puranas recount the mythologies of such popular gods as Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi (the Goddess). Rich in symbolism and containing a wide variety of divergent traditions, they describe the attributes of the gods and indicate how they should be worshipped. In the Linga Purana, Indra teaches a human sage about the cyclical nature of time. According to this system, when the universe is first created a golden age begins. During this time beings have long lifespans, beautiful bodies, and great happiness. As time goes on, however, things begin imperceptibly to worsen, and eventually it becomes necessary to divide people according to their predispositions.**

**In the Brahmanda Purana, Vishnu tells a human sage about the origin of the lingam, the phallus of Shiva. The lingam symbolizes both his procreative force and the energy he stores through asceticism. The story begins with a conversation between Brahma, said to be the creator of the universe in Hindu mythology, and Vishnu, who is the creator of Brahma. Brahma believes himself to be supreme, self-created, and omnipotent, but Vishnu informs him that he is in fact his creature. Both gods are then amazed**

**to see a huge flaming lingam that stretches out of sight. They agree to try to find its top and bottom, but after one thousand years flying respectively up and down are unable to fathom its dimensions. At this point they realize that there is a greater power than themselves, which turns out to be Shiva.**



## *Ramayana.*

The two great epics of Hinduism, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are monumental stories that weave history, myth, and religion into complex, multi-faceted tales that recount important historical and mythical events and indicate the lessons that should be drawn from them. The Ramayana tells the story of Rama—considered by tradition to be an incarnation (avatara) of Vishnu—who takes birth among humans in order to fight against evil forces and establish dharma in the world. Forced to leave his kingdom with his dutiful wife Sita, he wanders in the wilderness, establishing dharma wherever he goes. In a climactic battle he faces the demon Ravana, who has captured Sita. Rama slays Ravana, thus enabling dharma to be established in the demon's realm. The opening section of the Ramayana contains a synopsis of the main events of the story. The following verses tell of how prince Rama was banished from his kingdom through the machinations of his stepmother Kaikeyi, who had been told by his father Dasharatha that she could ask him for anything she wished. Kaikeyi requested that Rama, the rightful ruler, not assume the throne, and that her son Bharata would instead become king. As a righteous king, Dasharatha could not

refuse, and so reluctantly he acceded to the request.

Kaikeyi knew that the people of the kingdom wanted Rama to rule, and so to ensure that Bharata would remain king she asked that Rama be banished in order that popular opinion would not undermine her son's authority. The king agreed, but as a result he died of a broken heart soon after. Accompanied by his brother Lakshman and Sita, the model of a devout Hindu wife, Rama went off to the forest. During his travels he was beset by a horde of demons (rakshasa), but he defeated them all. This angered the demon lord Ravana, who captured Sita and imprisoned her in his city of Lanka. Ravana then fell in love with Sita and tried to convince her to renounce Rama and become his queen, but Sita spurned his advances. With the help of Hanuman, lord of monkeys, Rama eventually located Sita, slew Ravana, and rescued her. He then returned in triumph to his kingdom, and Bharata eagerly abdicated in Rama's favor, since he had never wished to usurp Rama.

Following Rama's return, however, his subjects began to gossip about Sita, insinuating that while she was in Ravana's castle she may have succumbed to his advances. Rama knew that Sita was innocent, but reluctantly realized that

**the gossip could undermine his moral authority, which is closely connected to his wife's conduct. Following the dictates of dharma, Rama was forced to banish Sita from the kingdom. Rama was heartbroken, knowing that her love for him kept her chaste in the castle of Ravana, but his royal duty required him to maintain his reputation for righteousness. The following verses describe how he left the kingdom, joined forces with Hanuman, and then defeated Ravana.**

## *Mahabharata*

The Mahabharata tells the story of a climactic battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, two rival clans contending for supremacy in northern India. Unlike the heroes of the Ramayana, the protagonists of the Mahabharata (the Pandavas) often make mistakes, question what is the right course of action, and regret wrong decisions. A section of the Mahabharata called the Bhagavad-gita is one of the most important religious texts in contemporary Hinduism. As the story opens in the Bhagavad-gita, the Pandava Arjuna, perhaps the greatest warrior of his generation, decides to scout the opposition. He asks his charioteer Krishna (who, unbeknownst to him, is really an incarnation of the god Vishnu) to drive the chariot in front of the enemy lines. As he rides past the Kauravas, however, he experiences a crisis of conscience: he recognizes that many of his opponents are relatives, friends, and teachers, and that killing them would result in a great deal of negative karma.

It is important to note that Arjuna is not concerned with killing per se; as a warrior he has killed many people in the past, but these particular people are linked to him by close karmic bonds, and so he perceives a contradiction between the demands of his

**warrior's duty (dharma) and the dictates of the law of karma. He decides that the only solution is to opt out of the conflict altogether and become a world renouncer.**

**In response, Krishna lectures him on the necessity of correctly performing dharma and indicates that Arjuna will receive more negative karma by dereliction of duty than by killing. Furthermore, Krishna asserts, his opponents have already assured their own destruction by their evil deeds, and so Arjuna is merely the instrument through which God will exact punishment. Then Krishna gives Arjuna a solution to the problem he faces, which involves a mental reorientation. Arjuna's problem, as explained by Krishna, is that he sees himself as an agent and is attached to the results of his actions. If, however, he learns the technique of "disciplined action" (karma-yoga), he can develop the ability to act without involving the false sense of ego. Arjuna is told to act selflessly, perceiving himself as an impersonal agent of dharma who is simply following God's will. If he offers all of his actions to God as an act of devotion and cultivates complete detachment, then Arjuna may act without acquiring any negative karma. Moreover, Krishna tells him, such a mental perspective is the mindset of the**

**true world renouncer, and this alone leads to liberation from cyclic existence.**

## ***THE PATH OF DEVOTION***

**Another important path to liberation lies in the "yoga of devotion" (*bhakti-yoga*), in which one finds salvation through completely identifying oneself with God. The yoga of devotion requires that one focus one's attention so completely on God that all thoughts of ego are transcended in a pure experience of union. There are a variety of ways of conceiving devotion: sometimes it takes the form of a love affair in which the devotee experiences an ecstatic union surpassing any human love; for others devotion takes the form of selfless service to an omnipotent master. Often Hindu devotionalism exhibits elements of both, along with a feeling of an intensely personal relationship between a human being and God.**

**Mirabhai remains one of the most popular devotional poets of medieval India. She was probably born around 1550 and is said to have been the wife of a Rajput prince who was the son of the ruler (Rana) of Mewar. According to legend, before her marriage she had fallen in love with Krishna and refused to consummate her marriage to the prince because her relationship with the Lord took precedence. One story that is told of her relates that one time she was exchanging words of love to a visitor on the other side of a locked door. Her father-in-law,**

the ruler, overheard her and, outraged by the shame she had brought on his family, threatened to kill her. She told him that the person to whom she was speaking was the Lord Krishna, and not a human lover, and her life was spared. In this poem she compares her unhappy home life to the joys of her love affair with Krishna.

Mahadeviyakka was an important poet of the iconoclastic Virashaiva tradition. In her poetry, her devotion to Shiva was often expressed in sexual terms. This led to conflicts with traditional mores and values, particularly those regarding the proper conduct of women. In the following verses, she indicates that her intense devotion to Shiva prevented her from the devotion to her husband required of a traditional Hindu wife. She compares her apparently loveless marriage with her husband to her devotion to Shiva and indicates how little she values the former relationship in comparison with her devotional love affair with the Lord.

I have Maya for mother-in-law; the world  
for father-in-law;  
three brothers-in-law, like tigers;



**And the husband's thoughts are full of  
laughing women: no god, this man.**

**And I cannot cross the sister-in-law.**

**But I will give this wench the slip and go  
cuckold my husband with Hara, my Lord.**

**My mind is my maid: by her kindness, I join  
my Lord, my utterly beautiful Lord from  
the mountain-peaks, my lord white as  
jasmine,**

**and I will make Him my good husband.**

**[poem by Mahadeviyakka]**

## ***SOCIAL STRUCTURE***

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The Upanishads and Patanjali's yoga system represent a shift from the primacy of sacrifices to the gods in the early Vedic period to an general acceptance of the idea that the final goal of the religious path is moksha. As final liberation from cyclic existence came to be viewed as the supreme goal, sacrifices aimed at maintaining the order of the world and the acquisition of mundane benefits were consequently devalued as inferior to the pursuit of knowledge of truth. As an apparent reaction to this trend, orthodox elements began to stress the importance of performing one's social duties (*dharma*). Texts like the *Laws of Manu* and the *Bhagavad-gita* emphasized the importance of selfless, devout adherence to the duties of one's social class (*varna*): the brahmins, the warriors and rulers (*kshatriya*), the merchants and tradespeople (*vaishya*), and the servants (*shudra*). Both texts asserted that if people ignore their sacred duty the world will fall into chaos, society will crumble, and essential social functions will not be performed. The *Laws of Manu* delineate a system in which people should eventually renounce the world and pursue final liberation, but only after first performing the duties assigned to their social class. In its system of "duties of social classes and stages of life"

*(varnashrama-dharma)*, there are specific duties for each class, and these should be performed diligently in order to maintain the world. The system assumes that only in an ordered universe will some people have the leisure and resources to pursue liberation. The four stages of life are the student, the householder, the forest-dweller, and the world renouncer.

The ideal life begins with the student stage, in which a man finds a spiritual preceptor (*guru*), who teaches him the lore appropriate to his class. The three highest classes (brahmins, kshatriyas, and vaishyas) are said to be "twice-born" (*dvija*) because they undergo a ceremony (the *upanayana*) that initiates them into adulthood and is considered a "second birth." Only these three classes are permitted to study the Vedas or participate in Vedic rituals (but officiating in Vedic ceremonies is the special duty of brahmins).

After a period of study (which varies in length and content among the four classes), a man should marry (only within one's caste), produce male heirs to continue the lineage and perform sacrifices for him and his ancestors after his death, and support the brahmins whose rituals maintain the whole cosmos. According to Manu, after a man has successfully performed his duty, and when sees grandson born (assuring that the

lineage will continue) and gray hairs on his head, he may withdraw from society (often with his wife) and begin to sever the ties that he cultivated during his life in the world. As a "forest dweller" (*vanaprastha*), he should be celibate and detached from worldly enjoyments, cultivate meditation on ultimate truth, and pursue liberation. When he knows that his attachment to mundane things has ceased, he may take the final step of becoming a "world renouncer" (*samnyasin*), completely devoted to the ultimate goal, wandering from place to place and subsisting on alms, intent on final liberation from cyclic existence.

In this system, everything has its time and place, and while liberation is recognized as the ultimate goal of the religious life, it is not allowed to be pursued in a way that might destabilize society. When the demands of dharma have been met, one may pursue one's own ends, but Manu declares that renouncing the world too soon would lead to a degeneration of the whole society, and the resulting chaos would make the attainment of liberation difficult, if not impossible, for anyone.

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## JAINISM

The most distinctive features of Jainism are its extreme asceticism, together with its emphasis on personal effort, and its strict adherence to the doctrine of non-injury. The Jaina path to liberation involves renunciation of material things, coupled with ascetic practices aimed at purifying the soul (*jiva*), cleansing it of the karmic accretions that have colored it and bound it to matter (*ajiva*). In this process, one can only depend upon oneself and one's own effort. In Jainism there is no creator God and no higher power that can aid one in reaching salvation, which in Jainism is attained by first ridding oneself of all karma, both good and bad, and by attaining "liberating wisdom" (*kevala-jnana*), which allows one to separate oneself from matter.

## ***MAHAVIRA'S TEACHINGS.***

**The contemporary Jaina tradition traces itself back to Vardhamana Jnatriputra, an ascetic who was born in the northern part of modern-day Bihar in the sixth century B.C.E. This was also the area in which the Buddha lived, and the two religious leaders were said to have been familiar with each other's reputations and teachings. Both traditions rejected key elements of the dominant brahmanical system, including the sacrifices enjoined by the Vedas and the caste system, and both emphasized the goal of final liberation from cyclic existence, although they differed significantly in their paths.**

**Jaina scriptures contain a number of descriptions of the life and liberation of Mahavira. These emphasize his extreme asceticism, his self-control, his unshakable patience and equanimity, and his final victory. Due to his years of fighting the desires of the flesh, he gradually weaned himself of all physical desires and separated his spiritual essence from the bonds of material existence. Mahavira advocated a path of strict asceticism and non-injury (*ahimsa*) to all living things as the keys to liberation (*moksha*). By controlling desires, restraining the wandering of the senses, and limiting consumption to the minimum needed to sustain life, Mahavira eliminated all**

**attachments to material enjoyments, wandered naked from place to place (symbolizing his dispassion toward mundane norms and possessions), and through rigorous spiritual discipline eventually overcame any possibility of return to cyclic existence. In recognition of his hard-won victory over the temptations of the world, his followers commonly refer to him as Jina, meaning "Victor." The term Jaina means "Followers of the Victor."**

**Mahavira did not claim to be a religious innovator or to have discovered a new path to salvation; rather, he asserted that he was one of many who have discovered the way. According to Jaina tradition, he was the twenty-fourth Tirthankara, or "Ford-Maker," a name given by Jainas to the great ascetics who not only find the path to liberation, but also show it to others.**

## ***JAINA DOCTRINE***

***Asceticism.*** In Jaina practice, asceticism serves to discipline body and mind and is also used to burn off one's karma. Since in Jainism karma has a physical manifestation, it is not enough simply to gain knowledge: a person must also perform physical austerities in order to eradicate the physical effects of karma. In practicing monastic discipline, self-control is important, and a monk should gain firm control over his emotions and never lose his temper. No matter what others do to him—whether they speak harshly to him, injure him, or disturb him—he should never become angry at them and should always remain in control, because a moment of anger can destroy hard-won self-discipline and can lead to negative mental states and harmful actions.

An extreme aspect of Jaina asceticism is the practice of itvara or sallekhana, in which an advanced practitioner may voluntarily starve to death. This practice is said to eliminate large amounts of negative karma and may even lead to final liberation. According to legend, Mahavira himself did this, since he knew that he would be released at the end of his life and that the fast unto death would be an effective means of eliminating the last subtle vestiges of his karma. Generally a monk will prepare for this



practice through a graduated program of fasting that may last for twelve years, but if he is sick he can begin the fast without this previous training. In this passage, it is described as a difficult discipline, but the end reward is seen as a glorious culmination of one's spiritual training.

*Jiva.* Jain metaphysics divides the universe into two main categories, *jiva* and *ajiva*. *Jiva* refers to the life-principle that is found in all things, while *ajiva* is insentient matter, along with the categories of time and space. It is the main impediment to the release of individual *jivas*. According to Jainism, all things, even material entities, have a life force. *Jiva* is an eternal substance that adjusts in size and shape to the physical body it inhabits. Matter is non-sentient, and because of its connection with the life force, living beings inevitably suffer as a result of the fact that matter is prone to change and decay.

The *jiva*'s natural purview is universal—it is omniscient, but the senses place restrictions on it. To bring the soul to its natural omniscience, one needs to overcome the limitations imposed upon it by matter, to let the soul perceive without the constraints placed on it by the senses, which serve as blinders for the naturally

omniscient *jiva*. This leads to full and direct knowledge of all things in all aspects.

Jaina texts mention the Hindu gods on occasion, but Jaina philosophy is basically atheistic. One Jaina text considers various arguments for the existence of a creator of the universe and rejects them. This reflects a fundamental Jaina emphasis on the individual: there is no other power that is able to help the individual escape from cyclic existence—we are on our own, and every person's present position is the result of his or her own past actions. No outside power can change the results of one's karma, nor can anyone other than oneself effect one's salvation. The law of karma is absolute and operates according to its own laws, and no deity can abrogate the workings of karma. Each being must suffer the results of his or her actions, and no god can change this. It is up to the individual to work out his or her own salvation.

In Jain metaphysics, the universe is filled with life—everything possesses a soul, even plants and such apparently unliving things as stones, which are at such a low level of sentience, and so oppressed by matter, that they appear to be devoid of life. The soul is considered to be permeable, and all of one's actions lead to influxes of karma, which is seen as subtle matter that pervades the soul (as opposed to merely

covering or obscuring it). Karmic matter varies in color in accordance with the relative goodness or evil of the act committed. For instance, killing a living being, even inadvertently, leads to an influx of very dark karma (this is why many Jaina monks wear masks over their noses and mouths and carry brooms to sweep in front of themselves, in order to avoid inadvertently killing living beings). Beings who engage in occupations that involve a great deal of killing, such as butchers, have jet black *jivas*, which can only be cleansed through prodigious amounts of asceticism and physical mortification. Because of this, Jainas are strictly prohibited from engaging in occupations that involve the taking of life, which has kept them from being, for instance, hunters and fishermen.

Jainas also hold that each *jiva* has eternally been associated with *ajiva*, and there has never been a time when they were separated, and no "fall" through which *jiva* became associated with *ajiva*. *Jiva's* association with *ajiva* is beginningless, but it is possible to terminate it. In addition, there is no creator deity that made the world as it is—it has always been as it is and always will be, although it does go through cycles of relative degeneration and regeneration.

## *Liberation.*

The Jaina stress the total responsibility of the individual for his or her own actions and indicate that salvation is won or lost by oneself alone. Briefly, the Jaina path begins with renunciation of worldly things, conjoined with avoidance of any action that injures another living being. These practices are also linked to yogic meditation, which allows a person to discipline the senses and emotions and to eliminate desire.

All actions lead to karmic influx, but evil actions color the *jiva* with very dark karma that is difficult to eliminate, while good or meritorious actions color the *jiva* with light karma that is easily cleansed. Elimination of karma occurs naturally, and in every moment beings are working off the effects of past actions. Most beings, however, are simultaneously creating new karma, and so the process is self-perpetuating. The only way to burn off more karma than one creates is to dedicate oneself to a program of asceticism and meditation. The karma accumulated in the *jiva* will burn off naturally, but this is a slow process. It can be aided through fasting, celibacy, and various types of ascetic practices aimed at developing *tapas* (literally "heat," the energy

one acquires through self-restraint and asceticism). This may be used to burn off karma.

The first step of the Jaina path to liberation involves halting the influx of new karma (*samvara*), which is followed by a program of cleansing the karma one has already acquired (*nirjara*). When this process is completed one attains liberation (*moksha*).

Because of past karma that has not yet been eradicated, one may still have a physical body, but this too will pass away when its past karma is exhausted. At this point, the soul is freed of its bondage to matter, and is luminous, omniscient, and completely free. It then rises toward the top of the universe (which in traditional Jaina cosmology is pictured as a giant human), and comes to rest at the base of the cranium of the universe in a realm called "World of Saints" (*siddha-loka*), where it dwells forever with the other perfected beings, completely beyond any future suffering and eternally removed from the world.

No outside force or power can aid the individual in this process. Only one's own effort can cleanse one's *jiva* of the effects of accumulated karma. Gods and other human beings are unable to help the individual, since they are similarly enmeshed in the process. Even the

**Tirthankaras are unable to help (beyond providing instruction and guidance during their lifetimes), since their liberation has removed them from any concern with the world, and so they are beyond the reach of prayers and supplications.**

**Liberation is only possible in the realm in which humans live, which is said to be a small disk in the middle of the universe. Below this realm are various painful destinies, such as hells, and above it are the realms of demi-gods and gods. Humans are in a position superior to that of the gods, who live a long and blissful existence, and thus are unaware that when their good karma is exhausted they will inevitably sink back to the lower levels of rebirth.**

## ***SKY CLAD AND WHITE CLAD JAINS***

**Jainism today has two main sects, the Digambaras ("Sky Clad") and the Shvetambaras ("White Clad"). The former group believes that liberation requires renunciation of all possessions, including clothes. Digambara monks, following Mahavira's example, are expected to be completely naked, their only permitted possession a small broom used to whisk away insects before they sit or lie down.**

**The Shvetambaras agree that Mahavira wore no clothes, but assert that the present time is one of degeneration, and so nudity is inappropriate today. Their monks and nuns wear simple white robes, but this practice is denounced by Digambaras as indicating that they have attachments to worldly things. As a result, Digambaras hold that Shvetambara monastics are actually no more advanced spiritually than laypeople who follow the Jaina precepts.**

**Digambara and Shvetambara texts disagree on the spiritual aptitude of women. The Digambaras contend that women should not be permitted to go without clothing, and that since nudity is a precondition for liberation, women are unable to attain the supreme religious goal.**

**A woman's best hope is to follow the precepts and work toward a future rebirth as a man.**

**The Shvetambaras reject this idea and assert that women are able to attain liberation. Nudity, while commendable during Mahavira's time, is inappropriate today, and the wearing of simple clothes is no hindrance to liberation. Interestingly, both sects agree on the point that women should not be permitted to renounce clothing, since a woman's body is inherently sexual, and a naked woman would attract unwanted sexual desire.**

**The following passage is perhaps the earliest example of the Digambara doctrine that women are unable to attain liberation because of their gender. They cannot renounce clothing, they are fickle and emotional, their bodies are breeding grounds for small organisms, and their bodily processes lead to the destruction of these creatures, which is a violation of the dictates of non-injury.**

**These differences in monastic discipline parallel the divergences in their respective scriptural traditions. Each school has its own canon, and for the most part they do not accept the authority of the other's scriptures (although the doctrinal contents of the their texts are generally in accord). One reason for the disagreement is**



**the fact that the first Jaina synod was held about two centuries after Mahavira's death. The canon that resulted from this forms the core of the Digambara canon, but since it was held well after the death of the founder many texts had become lost or forgotten, and there were differing recensions of many works. In the fifth century the Shvetambaras held a council that resulted in their authoritative texts being written down and distributed to the Jaina community.**

## ***JAINA SCRIPTURES***

The oldest texts of the Jaina canon were written in Prakrits, languages that were related to Sanskrit but that numerous grammatical forms and vocabulary from local dialects. In later times Jaina writers began composing texts in local vernaculars, and sometimes in Sanskrit. The most widely accepted scriptures are named "Early Texts" (*Purva*), but these are no longer extant. Jaina scholars contend that elements of these texts are incorporated into the present canons. The Digambaras, for example, contend that one of the branches of their canon, the twelfth "Limb" (*Anga*) contains portions of the Early Texts.

The Shvetambara canon is referred to as "Tradition" (*Agama*) or "Doctrine" (*Siddhanta*), and contains forty-five texts that are arranged into six divisions: (1) the Limbs; (2) Sub-Limbs (*Upanga*); (3) Miscellaneous Texts (*Prakirnaka*); (4) Treatises on Cutting (*Chedasutra*), which mostly focus on matters of discipline; (5) Appendices (*Culikasutras*); and Basic Texts (*Mulasutras*). This canon contains a variety of texts of different ages and in different languages, and some texts contain material in different dialects.

The primary texts for Digambaras are scholastic texts written by authors who lived around the first century C.E., the most important of whom are Vattakera, author of the *Basic Conduct (Mulacara)*, Kundakunda, author of the *Essence of Doctrine (Samayasara)*, and Shivaraya, who wrote the *Accomplishment (Aradhana)*. Both Digambaras and Shvetambaras accept the authority of the *Treatise on Attaining the Meaning of the Principles (Tattvarthadhigama Sutra)*, a text that summarizes the key points of Jaina doctrine in 350 stanzas. In addition, both schools have extensive collections of didactic and expository works called *Supplements (Anuyoga)*, which cover a wide range of subjects, including rules for right living and dialectical debate, poetry, uplifting stories, and hymns.

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# **BUDDHISM**

## ***THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA.***

**According to traditional accounts, the Buddha was born a prince named Siddhartha Gautama in a small kingdom in what is today southern Nepal. His final incarnation was a culmination of a training program that spanned countless lifetimes, during which he gradually perfected the exalted qualities that would mark him as a buddha. Shortly after his birth, his father consulted a number of astrologers, all of whom declared that the newborn prince would become a great king and that he would rule the whole world with truth and righteousness. One astrologer, however, declared that if the prince were to see a sick person, an old person, a corpse, and a world renouncing ascetic, he would become dissatisfied with his life and become a wandering mendicant in order to seek final peace. These four things became known in Buddhism as the "four sights." The first three epitomize the problems inherent in the world, while the fourth points to the way out of the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, which is characterized by suffering and loss.**

**According to the Extensive Sport Sutra (Lalitavistara-sutra), Siddhartha's father, king Shuddhodana, decided to prevent his son from encountering any of the four sights and surrounded him with pleasant diversions during his early years. The prince, however, eventually convinced his father to let him visit a part of the city that lay outside the palace gates. Before allowing the prince to ride out in his chariot, Shuddhodana first ordered that the streets be cleared of all sick and old people, and that the prince not be allowed to see any corpses or world renouncers. Despite the king's efforts, however, at one point the path of the royal chariot was blocked by a sick man. Siddhartha had never before encountered serious illness, and he turned to Chandaka, his charioteer, and asked why the man appeared as he did. Chandaka informed the prince that the man had grown old and that such afflictions were the inevitable result of age. Siddhartha was amazed to find that most people see such sights every day but persist in short-sighted pursuits and mundane affairs, apparently unconcerned that they will inevitably become sick, grow old, and die.**

**In three subsequent journeys outside the palace, Siddhartha saw an old man and a corpse, and when he learned that eventually his young,**

healthy body would become weak and decrepit he fell into a profound depression. On a fourth trip, Siddhartha saw a world renouncer, a man who stood apart from the crowd, who owned nothing and was unaffected by the petty concerns of the masses, and who radiated calm, serenity, and a profound inner peace. This sight lifted Siddhartha's spirits, since it revealed to him that there is a way to transcend the vicissitudes of mundane existence and find true happiness. Realizing the folly of remaining in the palace, Siddhartha resolved to renounce the world and find inner peace. He then declared his desire to become awakened in order to show other suffering beings a way to end suffering.

Siddhartha left the palace and subsequently practiced meditation with several teachers, but none could show him a path leading to the cessation of suffering. At one point he fell in with five spiritual seekers who told him that the way to salvation lies in severe asceticism. He followed their practices, and eventually was only eating a single grain of rice per day. After swooning due to weakness, however, Siddhartha realized that extreme asceticism is just as much a trap as the hedonistic indulgence of his early years.

Thus he left his ascetic companions behind and resolved to find a path leading to the cessation of

suffering. He recognized that he would have to discover the truth for himself. Before embarking on his final quest for truth Siddhartha made a solemn vow, to not move from the spot upon which he stood until he attained enlightenment.

Siddhartha stood in a spot that is now known as "the Circle of Awakening," located in modern-day Bodhgaya. Sitting under a tree, during the night Siddhartha entered into progressively deeper meditative states, in which the patterns of the world fell into place for him, and thus he came to understand the causes and effects of actions, why beings suffer, and how to transcend all the pains and sorrows of the world. By the dawn of the next morning he had completely awakened from the misconceptions of ordinary people.

At dawn of the following morning, full awareness arose in him, and all traces of ignorance disappeared. He had become a "*buddha*," a term derived from the Sanskrit root word *budh*, meaning to wake up or to regain consciousness. Thus he was now fully awakened from the sleep of ignorance in which most beings spend life after life. At first he thought to remain under the tree and pass away without revealing what he had understood, since he knew that the teachings of an awakened being are subtle and difficult for ordinary

beings to comprehend. As he sat there in blissful contemplation, however, the Indian god Brahma came to him, bowed down before him, and begged him to teach others. Brahma pointed out that there would be some intelligent people who would derive benefit from his teachings and that many people would find true happiness by following the path that he had discovered.

Feeling a sense of profound compassion for suffering beings, Buddha agreed to share his wisdom with them, and so embarked on a teaching career that would last for about forty years. He traveled around India, teaching all who wished to listen, and many people recognized the truth of his words and became his disciples. According to Buddhist tradition, he was an accomplished teacher who was able to perceive the proclivities and mindsets of his listeners and who could skillfully adapt his teachings for each person and group while still retaining the essential message. He had many lay disciples, but he emphasized the centrality of a monastic lifestyle for those who were intent on liberation. After a long and successful teaching career, Buddha's body had become old and wracked with constant pain. Realizing that his mission had been accomplished, Buddha decided to enter final nirvana (parinirvana). He first asked his disciples if they had any final



questions, and then told them that they should rely on the teachings they had already received. Buddha further informed them that he had told them everything of the path and the true doctrine that could be put into words, holding nothing back, and so it was now up to them to put these teachings into practice. He then told Ananda that after his death it would be permissible for monks to abolish the minor rules of monastic discipline, but Ananda neglected to ask him which these were. Buddha again exhorted his followers to rely on the teachings he had already taught them, and Ananda informed him that none of the monks present had any doubts about the doctrine, the path, or monastic discipline. According to his biography, he died in a grove of trees near the town of Vaishali at the age of eighty.

## ***BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS***

**Shortly after making the decision to teach, Buddha surveyed the world in order to choose a place to begin his teaching career. He decided to travel to Sarnath, where his five former companions were still practicing pointless austerities, hoping in this way to find happiness. When meeting them he delivered his first discourse, known as the "Sutra Turning the Wheel of Doctrine" because it set in motion the Buddha's teaching career. In this discourse he lays out some of the themes that would be central to his later teachings, such as the importance of following a "middle way" that avoids the extremes of sensual indulgence and extreme asceticism, and the "four noble truths": (1) that all mundane existence involves suffering; (2) that suffering is caused by desire; (3) that there can be a cessation of suffering; and (4) the eightfold noble path that leads to this cessation.**

**Buddha recognized that all of the world's problems begin with a fundamental ignorance (*avidya*) that causes beings to misunderstand the true nature of reality. Because of this, they engage in actions that lead to their own suffering and fail to recognize what leads to happiness. He came to understand how the lives of all beings in the world are constantly influenced by the effects of their own actions**

*(karma)*, and that seeking happiness within the changing phenomena of the mundane world is a fundamental mistake. He saw everything in the world as impermanent (*anitya*) and understood that because of the fact of constant change even things that seem to provide happiness—such as wealth, fame, power, sex, relationships—are in fact sources of suffering (*duhkha*). Nirvana is said to be the final cessation of suffering, a state beyond the cycle of birth and death. As such, it could be said to be the ultimate goal of the path taught by the Buddha, whose quest was motivated by a concern with the unsatisfactoriness of cyclic existence and a wish to find a way out of the round of suffering that characterizes the mundane world. Despite its importance, however, there are few descriptions of nirvana in Buddhist literature.

A famous Buddhist passage contains a series of questions about metaphysical topics posed to the Buddha by a wandering ascetic named Vacchagotta. The Buddha's response is interesting: he does not even try to provide answers, nor does he indicate that he does not answer because of ignorance on his part. Rather, he tells Vacchagotta that there is no point in answering the questions, since they are irrelevant to the goal of salvation. He indicates that people who spend their time pondering

such questions and arguing about philosophical conundrums are unlikely to find release from suffering, and so the wisest course of action is to avoid such questions as a waste of time.

Although there are many passages in Buddhist literature in which faith is extolled as an important virtue, this faith should ideally be based on evidence and valid reasoning. In addition, there are several places in Buddhist literature in which Buddha exhorts his listeners to examine teachers and teachings closely before putting trust in them. In the following passage, Buddha addresses a group of people collectively referred to as Kalamas, who are confused by the conflicting claims of the religious systems of their day. Buddha advises them to verify all claims themselves by examining which doctrines lead to positive results, and which lead to negative ones. The former should be adopted, and the latter rejected.

After attaining awakening, the Buddha indicated that he had come to realize that everything comes into being in dependence upon causes and conditions—a doctrine referred to in Buddhism as "dependent arising" (*pratitya-samutpada*). Indeed, all the phenomena of the universe are interconnected by relationships of mutual causality. Things come into being in dependence upon causes and conditions, abide

due to causes and conditions, and eventually pass away due to causes and conditions. Thus, the world is viewed by Buddhists as a dynamic and ever-changing system. Buddha understood that because phenomena are in a constant state of flux there is no enduring essence underlying them. Nor is there a supreme being who oversees the process of change and decides the fates of beings. Rather, every being is responsible for its own destiny, and the entire system of universal interdependent causation is driven by its own internal forces. Individual beings are what they are because of the actions they performed in the past. Buddha describes the process of causation in relation to human existence, which is said to proceed in a cyclical fashion. Because of a basic misunderstanding of the workings of reality (referred to as "ignorance"), people falsely imagine that some worldly things can bring them happiness, and thus they generate desire and try to acquire these things. Such attitudes provide the basis for the arising of negative mental states, and these states in turn provide a basis for beings to return to the world in a future birth. This next life will begin with the conditioning of the last, and so the entire cycle will repeat itself unless a person recognizes the folly of conventional wisdom and chooses to follow the Buddhist path, which is designed to provide a way out of the

trap of cyclic existence. Buddhism emphasizes the importance of meditation as a means for attaining clarity of perception, eliminating mental afflictions, and escaping from cyclic existence.

A final doctrine commonly associated with Buddha is that of selflessness (anatta) which holds that there is no enduring self, no soul, no truly existent personal identity. The most famous exposition of this is in an early text called *Questions of King Milinda*. According to Buddhist tradition, the Bactrian king Menander (Pali: Milinda) engaged the Buddhist sage Nagasena in a series of philosophical discussions in which Nagasena convinced him of the truth of Buddha's teachings, particularly the doctrine of selflessness. The king at first expresses disbelief, pointing out that he is clearly speaking to Nagasena, who seems to be a concretely existing person. Nagasena convinces the king by using the analogy of a chariot, which is composed of parts that separately are incapable of performing the functions of a chariot, but which when assembled are given the conventional designation "chariot." Similarly, human beings (and all other phenomena) are merely collections of parts that are given conventional designations, but they lack any enduring entity.

**From a Buddhist perspective, the Buddha is not only important as a person who taught a corpus of texts. The events of his life serve as an inspiration to devout Buddhists, who see him as the supreme example of how meditative realization should be put into practice in daily life. He was modest, merciful and had compassion for all beings. He abstained from lying, abusive speech, gossip any kind of harm.**

### ***HINAYANA AND MAHAYANA SCHOOLS.***

**Shortly after his death his followers convened a council to codify the teachings of the Buddha. According to tradition, the council met in Rajagriha, a place in which Buddha had delivered many discourses. The participants were five hundred of his closest disciples who had become *arhats* (meaning that they had eradicated mental afflictions and transcended all attachment to mundane things). Such people, it was believed, would not be afflicted by faulty memories or biased by sectarian considerations.**

**The members of the assembly recounted what they had heard Buddha say on specific occasions, and they prefaced their remarks with the phrase, "Thus have I heard: At one time the Exalted One was residing in.... " This formula indicated that the speaker had been a member of the audience, and it provided the context and**

background of the discourse. Other members would certify the veracity of the account or correct minor details, and at the end of the council all present were satisfied that the Buddha's words had been definitively recorded. The canon of Buddhism was declared closed, and the council issued a pronouncement that henceforth no new teachings would be admitted as the "word of the Buddha" (*buddha-vachana*).

Despite the intentions of the council, however, new teachings and doctrines continued to appear in the following centuries, and the Buddhist community developed numerous divisions. The most significant of these was the split into two schools termed "Hinayana," or "Lesser Vehicle" and "Mahayana," or "Greater Vehicle." These names were obviously coined by the latter group, which considered itself to be superior to its rivals because it propounded a goal of universal salvation, while the Hinayana emphasized the importance of working primarily for one's own emancipation. The Hinayana ideal is the *arhat*, a being who overcomes all ties to the phenomenal world and so attains *nirvana*, which is said to be a state beyond birth and death. It is also described as perfect bliss.

Their Mahayana rivals condemned this as a selfish and limited goal. The Mahayana ideal is



the *bodhisattva* (a being—*sattva*—whose goal is awakening—*bodhi*), who seeks to attain the state of buddhahood in order to help others to find the path to final happiness. Some early Mahayana texts have a distinctly sectarian tone, particularly when they compare the ideals of the arhat and the bodhisattva. The Mahayana parable of the burning house from the *Lotus Sutra* is a famous allegory for the practice of "skillful means" (*upaya-kaushalya*), which is one of the important abilities of bodhisattvas and buddhas. It involves adapting the dharma to the interests and proclivities of individual listeners, telling them things that will attract them to the practice of Buddhism. The question posed in the dialogue concerns whether such tactics should be considered underhanded or dishonest. The answer, not surprisingly, is no: the means used are for the good of the beings, and benefit them greatly in the long run. Moreover, with beings who are thoroughly enmeshed in the concerns of the world it is necessary to draw their attention away from mundane pleasures toward the dharma, which can lead to lasting happiness.

The Mahayana form of Buddhism later predominated in Central and East Asia—countries such as Tibet, Mongolia, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and China—while Hinayana schools

took hold in Southeast Asia—in such countries as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, and Laos. Buddhists in these countries do not accept the designation of their tradition as a "Lesser Vehicle." Rather, they contend that the dominant Theravada tradition (the only one of the numerous schools collectively designated by the term "Hinayana" that survives today) is in fact the true teaching of Buddha. They further believe that the *Mahayanasutras* (discourses believed by Mahayanists to have been spoken by the historical Buddha) are in fact forgeries that proclaim practices and doctrines that the Buddha never taught, but which were actually falsely propounded by others long after his death.

*Madhyamaka Tradition.* The oldest distinctively Mahayana literature is a group of texts that discuss the "perfection of wisdom" (*prajna-paramita*). The earliest of these is probably the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines*, the oldest version of which may have been composed as early as the first century B.C.E. The Perfection of Wisdom texts do not make their appearance until several centuries after the death of the Buddha, but they claim to have been spoken by him during his lifetime. Mahayana tradition explains the chronological

discrepancy by contending that they were indeed taught by the Buddha to advanced disciples, but that he ordered that they be hidden in the underwater realm of *nagas* (beings with snakelike bodies and human heads) until the time was right for their propagation.

The legend further reports that the second-century philosopher Nagarjuna (fl. ca. 150 C.E.) was the person preordained by Buddha to recover and explicate the Perfection of Wisdom texts. After one of his lectures, some *nagas* approached him and told him of the texts hidden in their kingdom, and so Nagarjuna traveled there and returned with the sutras to India. He is credited with founding the Madhyamaka (Middle Way) school of Buddhist philosophy, which emphasized the centrality of the doctrine of emptiness. For Nagarjuna, concepts are empty because language is simply an interconnected system of terms that do not capture actual things. They simply relate to other words. One who fully recognizes this fact becomes freed from the snares of language and attains correct realization, an important part of the path to liberation. The final nature of phenomena is referred to in Mahayana texts by a variety of terms, including emptiness, suchness, reality-limit, and the ultimate. Perfection of Wisdom texts contain many warnings against

holding too rigidly to doctrines, even Buddhist doctrines. In one passage, Buddha warns his disciple Subhuti against conceiving sentient beings as truly existing, and then applies the reasoning of emptiness to other Buddhist categories.

Nagarjuna and his commentators (the most influential of whom was Chandrakirti, ca. 550-600) developed the philosophical ramifications of this doctrine, which is closely connected with the notion of dependent arising. Since all phenomena come into being as a result of causes and conditions, abide due to causes and conditions, and pass away due to causes and conditions, everything in the universe is empty of a substantial entity. Ordinary beings, however, perceive them as existing in the way that they appear—that is, as real, substantial things that inherently possess certain qualities. Nagarjuna declared that a failure to understand emptiness correctly leads to mistaken perceptions of things, and that erroneous philosophical views are the reifications of such notions. The Madhyamaka philosophers applied this insight not only to mistaken perceptions, but also to the doctrines of rival schools, which they contended were founded on self-contradictory assumptions. Through a process of dialectical reasoning, Madhyamaka thinkers

exposed both Buddhist and non-Buddhist systems of thought to a rigorous critique, the goal of which was to lead people to recognize the ultimate futility of attempting to encapsulate truth in philosophical propositions.

*Yogachara Tradition.* Approximately two centuries after Nagarjuna, a new Mahayana school arose in India, which is commonly known as the Yogic Practice School (*Yogachara*). The main scriptural source for this school is the *Sutra Explaining the Thought (Samdhinirmochana-sutra)*, which consists of a series of questions put to the Buddha by a group of bodhisattvas. The name "Yogic Practice School" may have been derived from an important treatise by Asanga (ca. 310-390) entitled *the Levels of Yogic Practice (Yogachara-bhumi)*. Along with his brother Vasubandhu (ca. 320-400), Asanga is credited with founding this school and developing its central doctrines. Yogachara emphasizes the importance of meditative practice, and several passages in Yogachara texts indicate that the founders of the school perceived other Mahayana Buddhists as being overly concerned with dialectical debate while neglecting meditation. The Yogachara school is commonly referred to in Tibet as "Mind Only"

(*sems tsam*; Sanskrit: *chitta-matra*) because of an idea found in some Yogachara texts that all the phenomena of the world are "cognition-only" (*vijnapti-matra*), implying that everything we perceive is conditioned by consciousness.

The *Sutra Explaining the Thought* is one of the earliest descriptions of the "basis consciousness" (*alaya-vijnana*), a doctrine that was central to the Yogachara school and that was also influential in other Mahayana countries, particularly Tibet and China. The basis consciousness is the most fundamental level of mind, and it is said to be comprised of the "seeds" of past actions and mental states. The seeds become part of the continuum of the basis consciousness, which is moved along by their force. If one cultivates positive actions and thoughts, for example, one's mind will become habituated to positive actions and thoughts. The converse is true of those who engage in negative actions and thoughts. Under appropriate conditions, the seeds give rise to corresponding thoughts and emotions, and these are the phenomena of ordinary experience. Mind and its objects are said to arise together, and so there is no substantial difference between subject and object. Because of this, phenomena are said to be "cognition-only" (*vijnapti-matra*),

meaning that all we ever perceive are mental impressions, and not things in themselves.

In the following centuries, a number of syncretic schools developed. They tended to mingle Madhyamaka and Yogachara doctrines. The greatest examples of this syncretic period are the philosophers Shantarakshita (ca. 680-740) and Kamalashila (ca. 740-790), who are among the last significant Buddhist philosophers in India.

*Tantra.* In addition to these developments in philosophy, sometime around the sixth or seventh century a new trend in practice developed in India, which was written down in texts called *tantras*. These texts purported to have been spoken by the historical Buddha (or sometimes by other buddhas), and while they incorporated the traditional Mahayana ideal of the bodhisattva who seeks buddhahood for the benefit of all beings, they also proposed some radically new practices and paradigms. The central practices of *tantra* include visualizations intended to foster cognitive reorientation, the use of prayers (*mantra*) to buddhas that are intended to facilitate the transformation of the meditator into a fully enlightened buddha, and often elaborate rituals.

Tantric texts claim that the system of tantra skillfully uses aspects of reality that cause bondage for people who are enmeshed in mundane conceptuality—things like desire and other negative emotions. These may serve as aids to the path of liberation if the proper means are used. In the tantric practice of deity yoga (*devata-yoga*), meditators first visualize buddhas in front of themselves (this is referred to as the "generation stage," *utpanna-krama*), and then they invite the buddhas to merge with them, a process that symbolically transforms them into buddhas (this is referred to as the "completion stage," *nishpanna-krama*). The practice of deity yoga is intended to help meditators to become familiar with having the body, speech, and mind of buddhas, and with performing the compassionate activities of buddhas. Because meditators train in the desired effect of buddhahood, the path of tantra is said by its adherents to be much shorter than that of traditional Mahayana, which was said to require a minimum of three "countless eons" (*asamkhyeya-kalpa*) to complete. With the special practices of tantra, it is said to be possible to become a buddha in as little as one human lifetime.

Tantric adepts claim that the fact that tantra uses emotions like desire as means in the path is



an example of the skillful practices of the system. In his *Commentary on the Samputa Tantra*, Viryavajra contends that there are four levels of the use of desire: visualizing a man and woman looking at each other; laughing with each other; holding hands; and sexual union. Each of these represents a progressively higher level of desire. One should engage in these practices, however, in order to utilize the energy of desire as a force that can be used to eradicate mental afflictions. The skillful use of desire is said in some texts to be like rubbing two sticks together to make a fire, which then consumes the sticks themselves. In this case, the process is compared to the way that insects are born in wood, and then later consume the wood.

The special techniques of tantra are said to be very powerful, but they can also be dangerous. Thus tantric texts warn meditators to find qualified spiritual guides (guru) who can help them to avoid possible pitfalls. One of the central practices of tantra is "guru yoga," in which one visualizes one's guru as a fully enlightened buddha. One who does this successfully is said to move quickly toward actualization of buddhahood

## ***THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM OUTSIDE OF INDIA***

**Following this last flowering of Buddhist thought in India, Buddhism began to decline. It became increasingly a tradition of elite scholar-monks who studied in great monastic universities like Nalanda and Vikramashila in northern India. Buddhism failed to adapt to changing social and political circumstances, and apparently lacked a wide base of support. Thus, when a series of invasions by Turkish Muslims descended on India in the ninth through twelfth centuries, after the invaders had sacked the great north Indian monastic universities and killed many prominent monks, Buddhism was dealt a death blow from which it never recovered. However, from as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E. Buddhism made its way into the countries surrounding India, ensuring its survival.**

## *South East Asia and China*

The first major export of Buddhism was championed by Ashoka (270-232), the third of the Mauryan kings who created the first pan-Indian empire. Ashoka was converted to Buddhism by a Theravada monk and, after a bloody war of conquest against the neighboring state of Kalinga, he recognized that such aggression violated the principles of Buddhism. From this point on he renounced war as an instrument of foreign policy. He began to implement Buddhist principles in the administration of the kingdom and, in order to inform the populace of his political and ruling philosophy, he had edicts inscribed on stone pillars and placed throughout his kingdom. A number of them still survive today. His reign is considered by Buddhists to have been a model of good government, one that was informed by Buddhist principles of righteousness and respect for life.

His advocacy of Buddhism was one of the primary reasons for the spread of the tradition into Southeast Asia. He sent teams of missionaries all over the Indian sub-continent, and to Sri Lanka, Burma, and other neighboring areas. Due to Ashoka's influence and personal power, the missionaries were generally well-received in the countries they

visited, and they were often successful in convincing people to convert to Buddhism. One of the most successful of the missions he sponsored was led by his son Mahinda, who traveled to Sri Lanka along with four other monks and a novice. According to Buddhist tradition, the mission was so successful that the king of Sri Lanka became a Buddhist, and Mahinda then supervised the translation of the Theravada canon (written in the Pali language) into Sinhala. He also helped to found a monastery that was named the Mahavihara, which became the main bastion of Theravada orthodoxy on Sri Lanka for over 1,000 years.

It is unclear exactly when Buddhist first arrived in East Asia. China was the first country in the region to record contact with Buddhism: a royal edict issued in 65 C.E. reports that a prince in what is now northern Kiangsu Province performed Buddhist sacrifices and entertained Buddhist monks and laypeople. The earliest Buddhists in China were probably from Central Asia, and for centuries Buddhism was widely perceived as a religion of foreigners. In 148 C.E. a monk named An Shih-kao, from the Central Asian kingdom of Kusha, began translating Indian Buddhist texts into Chinese in Lo-yang, which was to become the capital of the later Han dynasty. An Shih-kao and a number of other

monks (mostly from Central Asia) translated about thirty Buddhist texts during the next three decades. The early translators used a translation system termed "matching concepts" (*ko-i*), which was to have important ramifications for the development of Chinese Buddhism. Realizing that China had a highly developed culture and that Chinese tended to view people from other countries as uncouth barbarians, the early translators used indigenous terminology—particularly Taoist terminology—to translate Sanskrit technical terms. One result of this practice was that it made many foreign ideas more palatable to Chinese readers, but it also inevitably colored the translations to such an extent that for the first few centuries after Buddhism's arrival in China, many Chinese believed it to be another version of Taoism.

*Japan.* In later centuries, Chinese Buddhism developed its own identity, and from China Buddhism was passed on to Korea and Japan. In 552, according to the *Nihonshoki*, the Korean state of Paekche sent Buddhist texts and images to Japan, hoping to persuade the Japanese emperor to become an ally in its war with the neighboring state of Silla. Some members of the Soga clan wanted to worship the buddha as a

powerful foreign god (*kami*), hoping by this to gain influence by associating themselves with what they believed to be a deity of the powerful Chinese empire. The early Japanese interest in Buddhism was mostly connected with purported magical powers of buddhas and Buddhist monks, but after the emperor Yomei (r. 585-587) converted to Buddhism the Japanese began to travel to China in order to study with Buddhist teachers there, and indigenous Buddhist schools developed in Japan. Yomei's son Prince Shotoku (574-622) enthusiastically propagated Buddhism. He is credited with building numerous Buddhist temples and with sponsoring Japanese monks to travel to China for study. He is also the author of commentaries on three Buddhist texts. In later times he was viewed in Japan as an incarnation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.

Esoteric Buddhism also made its way into Japan, championed by Kukai (774-835), posthumously known as Kobo Daishi, one of the most influential thinkers of the Heian period (794-1185). He traveled to China in 804 to study Buddhism, and learned the doctrines and practices of Esoteric Buddhism (Chinese: Chen-yen; Japanese: Shingon) with the Chinese master Hui-kuo. This school is a branch of Vajrayana ("Vajra Vehicle"), which is based on the tantras of Indian Buddhism. Like its

counterparts in South Asia, East Asian Esoteric Buddhism emphasizes the importance of visualizations, mantras, and rituals for bringing about a cognitive transformation of one's mind into the mind of a buddha. Kukai compares the path of Esoteric Buddhism to that of Exoteric Buddhism. He contends that Esoteric Buddhism is far superior to the Exoteric teachings and practices and that it is more effective in bringing about mundane benefits as well as final awakening. Kukai believed that human beings have the capacity to become "awakened in this very body" (sokushin jobutsu) and that the rituals and symbols of Esoteric Buddhism appeal directly to their basic nature of buddha-potential and enable them quickly to attain the state of buddhahood. These practices bring the body, speech, and mind of the meditator into concordance with those of the truth body, and thus allow the primordial buddha Mahavairochana to communicate directly with advanced practitioners.

Nichiren (1222-1282) was one of the most charismatic figures of Japanese Buddhism. Initially trained in the Tendai school, he became disenchanted with its doctrines and practices, considering them to be inappropriate to the current age, which he believed to be the "age of degenerate dharma" (Japanese: mappo) that the

**Buddha had predicted would begin 1,500 years after his death. Many Japanese Buddhists of the Kamakura period (1185-1333) believed that the turmoils of the time indicated that the final age of dharma had arrived, and a number of teachers believed that in such a time new models and practices were required. Since in the final age people become progressively more degenerate, Nichiren contended that the practices of the past—including intensive meditation practice and adherence to monastic vows—were no longer possible for most people, and thus simpler and more effective practices, appropriate to mappo, were required. Nichiren focused on the Lotus Sutra (Saddharma-pundarika-sutra) as the only viable teaching for mappo, and he counseled his followers to place all of their faith in it. Its teachings, however, were deemed too profound for most people to understand, and so Nichiren developed the practice of chanting the title of the sutra (Namu Myohorengekyo in Japanese) and trusting to the saving power of the sutra to bring worldly benefits and final salvation.**

**The Pure Land (Chinese: Ching-t'u; Japanese: Jodo) tradition focuses on a buddha named Amitabha ("Limitless Light") or Amitayus ("Limitless Life"), who as a merchant named Dharmakara is said to have made a series of**



vows concerning the sort of "buddha-land" he will create after his attainment of buddhahood. In the *Sutra on the Array of the Joyous Land* (Sukhavati-vyuha-sutra), the author Dharmakara indicates that his land will be especially wonderful, a place in which the conditions for buddhahood are optimal. Beings fortunate to be born into this land will receive teachings from buddhas and bodhisattvas, and they will quickly progress toward awakening. He also teaches that beings may be reborn in his land if they have sincere faith in him. Shinran (1173-1262), a Japanese Pure Land teacher, writes that anyone may be reborn in Amitabha's paradise, regardless of past actions. Previous teachers had contended that birth in Sukhavati required good moral character and constant repetition of the formula, "Praise to Amida Buddha" (Namu Amida Butsu), but Shinran declared that all that is necessary is one moment of sincere belief (shinjin, literally "believing mind"). Shinran makes a distinction between "self-power," which characterizes the practices of early Buddhism, and "other-power," in which one relies completely on the saving power of Amitabha. Shinran contends that the former practice was appropriate in the Buddha's day, but in the present age is one of degeneration, and so human beings have become so depraved that their only hope is to rely on Amitabha.

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***Tibet.*** During the reign of the Tibetan king Trisong Detsen (740-798), the Indian scholar Shantarakshita traveled to Tibet, but opposition from some of the king's ministers forced him to leave. Before departing, he urged the king to invite the tantric adept Padmasambhava. Upon his arrival in Tibet, Padmasambhava claimed that Shantarakshita's efforts had been frustrated by the country's demons. Padmasambhava then challenged the demons to personal combat, and none were able to defeat him. This so impressed the king and his court that Shantarakshita was invited back at Padmasambhava's urging, and the first monastery in Tibet was built at Samye. This marked the beginning of the "first dissemination" of Buddhism to Tibet, which ended when the devout Buddhist king Relbachen (815-836) was assassinated. His death in 836 marked the beginning of an interregnum period for Tibetan Buddhism, which ended in 1042 when Atisha (982-1054, one of the directors of the monastic university of Nalanda, traveled to Tibet. This is considered by Tibetan historians to mark the beginning of the "second dissemination" of Buddhism to Tibet. Atisha was so successful in bringing the dharma to

**Tibet that Buddhism quickly became the dominant religious tradition in the country.**

**Tibetan Buddhism has four main schools: the Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Geluk. The "great completion" (dzogchen) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism is practiced by all of the schools but most closely associated with the Nyingma. In this system all phenomena are said to be creations of mind that, like mind, are a union of luminosity and emptiness. In the following passage, the appearances of things to the mind are compared to the reflections of forms in a mirror. Niguma is said by Tibetan tradition to have been the founder of the Shangpa lineage of the Kagyu tradition. She describes the view of mahamudra (literally, "great seal"), which is said by the Kagyu school to be the supreme form of Buddhist practice. In mahamudra, one dispenses with the visualizations and rituals of tantra and focuses on the natural state of mind, which is said to be a union of clear light and emptiness. All phenomena are viewed as the spontaneous play of mind, and by cultivating this awareness it is said that the meditator moves quickly toward the attainment of buddhahood.**

**The Sakya school teaches that there are three main levels of awareness, which are summarized in the following stanzas from Virupa's Vajra**

**Verses;. The first verse refers to the perceptions of ordinary beings, which are colored by ignorance and mental affliction. The second verse describes the perceptions of people on the path, who have some experience with meditation and thus have overcome some of their mental afflictions. The final verse indicates that buddhas perceive the world unafflicted by ignorance, hatred, desire, etc. and so are at the level of the "pure appearance." The Sakya tradition stresses that although they appear to be incompatible, the three appearances are fundamentally non-different.**

**For sentient beings with the afflictions is the impure appearance.**

**For the meditator with transic absorption is the appearance of experience.**

**For the ornamental wheel of the Sugata's [Buddha's] inexhaustible enlightened body, voice and mind is the pure appearance.**

**[Rdo rje tshigs rkang, ch. 1]**

**The following verses, according to the Sakya tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, were spoken to Gunga Nyingpo (1092-1158, the "Great**

**Sakyapa" (Sachen). They are a summary of the entire Buddhist path, including the renunciation of the world, the development of compassion, and the importance of avoiding extreme views.**

**If you cling to this life, then you are not a dharma practitioner.**

**If you cling to existence, then you do not have renunciation.**

**If you are attached to your own interests, then you do not have the mind of enlightenment.**

**If you hold to [a position], then you do not have the correct view.**

**[Zhen pa bzhi bral]**

**Tsong Khapa, the founder of the Gelukpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, outlines a seven step program for developing the "mind of enlightenment," which marks the beginning of the bodhisattva path. Ordinary beings are consumed by self-centered desires and think primarily of their own narrow interests. Bodhisattvas spend countless eons working toward buddhahood for the benefit of all beings,**

**cheerfully accepting all the tribulations that occur along the path. Given the vast gulf between the attitudes of bodhisattvas and ordinary beings, it is difficult to for people enmeshed in mundane concerns to imagine making the transition to true altruism. The seven step program begins by recognizing that because one has been reborn in an infinite variety of situations since beginningless time, one has been in every possible relationship with every other sentient being. Thus, every sentient being has been one's mother, and has been a nurturing and caring friend. One should reflect on the kindness of one's own mother, and then think that every other being has been equally kind. One then resolves to repay this kindness, and generates a feeling of love toward others, wishing that they have happiness and the causes of happiness. One then develops compassion for sentient beings, since they are experiencing suffering as a result of contaminated actions and afflictions. In the next stage one attains the "unusual attitude," which involves vowing to work to free all beings from suffering and establish them in buddhahood. The final step is attainment of the mind of enlightenment, which is a resolve to do whatever is necessary to attain buddhahood in order to help all sentient beings.**

**A Tibetan classic attributed to Padmasambhava describes the "intermediate state" that all beings are said to enter after death. During the process of dying, the physiological changes that occur are accompanied by mental changes in which the coarser levels of mind drop away, revealing progressively more subtle aspects of consciousness. At the moment of death, the most subtle level of mind dawns. This is called the "mind of clear light," and compared to it all other minds are adventitious. At this point one enters the intermediate state and experiences strange and terrifying sights. These are all said to be aspects of one's own mind, and they include visions of mild and terrifying beings, deafening sounds, and other intense sense experiences. The intermediate state is a time of great opportunity, however, and if one is able to maintain awareness and focus on the clear light nature of mind and perceive all experiences as merely aspects of mind, one may become a buddha, or at least attain rebirth in the pure land of a buddha. In such places the conditions are optimal for beings who seek buddhahood. If one is unable to maintain mindfulness, one will be reborn in accordance with one's accumulated karma.**

**Milarepa, one of the most influential figures in Tibetan Buddhism, was born into a fairly well-**

**to-do family, but his greedy aunt and uncle took everything away from him, his mother, and sister. Overcome by rage, his mother coerced Milarepa into learning black magic and sending a curse on the aunt and uncle, with the result that a number of people died, but not the primary objects of his revenge. Milarepa, terrified of the consequences of his evil deeds, searched for a spiritual guide (lama) who could help him escape the consequences of his actions. He eventually found Marpa, who gave Milarepa a series of difficult and dispiriting tasks, which cleansed his negative karma. After this Milarepa spent many years living in a cave and practicing solitary meditation, which culminated in his attainment of awakening. He is considered in Tibet to be the supreme example of the attainment of buddhahood in one lifetime through tantric practice.**



## *Buddhism Today.*

Today Buddhism continues to flourish in Asia, despite such setbacks as the suppression of religion in China since the inauguration of the People's Republic of China. The current government follows Karl Marx's notion that religion is "the opiate of the masses" and an impediment to social development. In recent years government persecution of Buddhism has eased somewhat, and currently it is enjoying increased support from the Chinese populace. The government is also allowing young people to become ordained as Buddhist monks and nuns. Buddhism is becoming increasingly popular in Western countries, and a number of prominent Buddhist teachers have established successful centers in Europe and North America. The Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Sogyal Rinpoche, a number of Zen masters (*roshi*), and Theravada meditation teachers have attracted substantial followings outside of Asia, and books and articles about Buddhism are appearing with increasing frequency in Western countries.

## *CH'AN AND ZEN.*

The Ch'an (Japanese: Zen) school developed in China. Asserting that the teachings of the school were a "special transmission outside of the scriptures," Zen masters claimed that their tradition represents the authentic teaching of the Buddha, who is said to have passed on the essence of his enlightened mind to his disciple Mahakashyapa. He in turn passed it on to his main disciple, and so it continued in India through an unbroken chain of transmission until Bodhidharma, the last Indian "patriarch," traveled to China. Bodhidharma, a semi-legendary figure, is said to have arrived at the Shao-lin monastery in China, where he sat in silent meditation in front of a wall for several years. At the end of this period, he began teaching the tradition to Chinese disciples, one of whom became the first Chinese patriarch.

An important early figure in the development of Ch'an is Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch. He describes many of the important doctrines of the developed Ch'an tradition, including the doctrine of "sudden enlightenment," which holds that buddhas become enlightened in a flash of insight, and not gradually, as traditional Indian Buddhism taught. According to Indian Buddhist meditation texts, meditators should enter into concentrated meditative states called

samadhi, and these states lead to the awakening of wisdom (prajna). Hui-neng, however, declared that such ideas impose a false dualism onto the path to buddhahood. He contended that both concentration and wisdom are present in every moment of thought and that they cannot legitimately be separated. He also opposed the goal-oriented practices of traditional Mahayana, and said that one becomes awakened by eliminating discursive thought. When all conceptual thoughts drop away and one attains the state of "no-thought" (wu nien), the mind flows freely and unimpededly, in harmony with the rhythms of the world. This is the state of mind characteristic of buddhahood, and any notions of "path" and "goal," or "cultivation" and "attainment" are products of dualistic thinking that will impede one's progress toward awakening.

Ch'an and Zen later split into two distinct schools: the Soto (Chinese: Ts'ao-tung), and the Rinzai (Chinese: Lin-chi). Dogen (1200-1253), founder of the Soto (Chinese: Ts'ao-tung) school of Zen, traveled to China in 1223 and studied with Ju-ching, a Chinese Ch'an master. One day during meditation practice, another monk fell asleep, and Ju-ching woke him up, admonishing him to practice meditation diligently in order to "drop off body and mind" (Japanese: shinjin